Unmaking Africa—the Humanities and the Study of What?

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses what I take to be a paradox in Africa's constitution as a scholarly object of inquiry. The study of Africa renders Africa both visible and invisible. When the humanities—and the social sciences—appear beleaguered, solving this paradox may hold the key to understanding what we need to say we are studying for us to say what we are good for. What is left over when we remove Africa from the stock of knowledge the humanities produce?

In all the years I have been an African studies scholar, I have asked myself how much and what exactly I need to sacrifice to be a proper scholar. Often, this is a question about how much, and what exactly, I need to surrender to remain a true African. The tension between being a scholar and being an African is not a natural one. It arises out of the relationship between a form of social science knowledge originating from a particular place in the world and the position of someone from a different place in the world who is wary of the vocabulary underpinning social science knowledge. It is a central part of the experience of being a scholar, and an African, to move in and out of an inclusive and exclusive "we." The "we" of "us social scientists" is an inclusive one. The "we" of "us social scientists who also happen to be African" is an exclusive one. It is consistent with how "gender," for instance, may produce a similar kind of tension.

Being an African scholar is, partly, deciding how much scholarship will be left once one has chosen to be an African. Still, once one has become aware of being one, or even

once one has concluded that one is part of a game in which others play with loaded dice, the tension remains. Unlike our European and North American colleagues, we do not relate to science and the humanities in the same way. The theoretical and conceptual vocabularies that science and the humanities deploy to render the world intelligible are homegrown in Europe. They reflect the confluence of particular historical, social, economic, and political circumstances that are intelligible, in the first instance, from within. They speak to a normative order that is readily intelligible. This is not to suggest that every Western scholar is complicit in upholding self-serving narratives. It is simply to draw attention to the familiar nature of the world that the language of scholarship reproduces.

In our case, that is, for African (or non-European) scholars, things are different. The language of science and the humanities is not merely a tool to make sense of the world. It is also a reminder of our position in the world. It is a reminder of the moral source from which it ensued to justify how the African continent became an object in world history. The normative order rendering the language of science morally coherent in Europe breaks down on the African continent, revealing hypocrisy and cynicism. This is the problem that this essay addresses. It is also a way of building a bridge from the social sciences across to the humanities.

I want to address what I take to be a paradox in the pursuit of knowledge about Africa. It consists, on the one hand, in the idea that one can deploy a conceptual vocabulary developed in one place, at one particular time, under certain social, political, and economic circumstances to render a specific world unknown to the people who produced the conceptual vocabulary visible and intelligible to them. That is the problem I briefly mentioned above. On the other hand, one assumes that one can use the language of the social sciences that emerged in the context of the invention of the idea of progress in Europe. The underlying idea of progress was teleological, and it could only account for the human condition of non-Europeans by assuming that they had to be like Europeans to be rendered visible.

AFRICA AS A SIMULACRUM

My claim is that these two sides work against each other. The claim to knowledge emerging from this kind of epistemology is one premised on misrepresentation. I do not mean misrepresentation in the sense of deliberately telling lies about someone else's world or culture. I do not even mean it in the sense in which Valentin Mudimbe, following Foucault, claimed Africa to have been an invention functional to the reproduction of Western power over the rest.[1] My sense of misrepresentation draws from the French social

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1. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*.

thinker Jean Baudrillard.[2] I draw on his notion of a *simulacrum*, that is, the truthful representation of that which does not exist, to claim that Africa is a nonexistent entity about which honest representations abound, those produced by the social sciences and the humanities, on the one hand, and those created by us, that is, Africans, in response to the former, on the other hand.

Part of this has to do with the overall context within which the vocabularies of the social sciences and humanities emerged, that is, the Enlightenment project and how it laid down the ideological background against which the idea of the human condition could find fruition. One essential intellectual resource created and deployed to that end was the concept of social change, a concept without which the epistemological edifice of the social sciences would come crumbling down. Imre Lakatos's notion of a research program with its hardcore assumptions and auxiliary hypotheses can be helpful in this connection.[3]

Evolution and its elaboration in terms of theories of social change stand at the center of the intellectual agenda of the social sciences as they emerged in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries to herald a new world. They emerged, most of all, to invent a vocabulary to describe that world. Truthfulness did not depend on empirical validation but rather on how successful the vocabulary was in sustaining the auxiliary assumptions whose primary function was to nurture the illusion of truth. Ideas like progress, civilization, secularization, and, in our days, development wove a protective net around the hardcore assumption of a world intelligible with the help of theories of social change to produce Baudrillard's *simulacra*, that is, accurate representations of things that do not exist.

Social change posited social cohesion as a function of what needs to be done to allow history to take its course. Since history was supposed to be moving farther toward progress, the vocabulary of sociology made social organization an artifact of change, not a local response to local circumstances. To be modern was to respond to organic forms of "social integration," to use Emile Durkheim's terminology;[4] to undergo a process of "sociation" (*Vergesellschaftung*),[5] to use Max Weber's; or, to be more nostalgic, perhaps to be "society" (*Gesellschaft*) instead of "community" (*Gemeinschaft*), to use Ferdinand Tönnies's terminology.[6] Not to be modern was not simply not being organically integrated, that is, mechanically integrated (*Vergemeinschaftung*),[7] but rather being in a

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2. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

3. Lakatos, *Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*.

4. Durkheim, *Division of Labour in Society*.

5. Weber, *Economy and Society*.

6. Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*.

7. Literally, the "formation of community."

state of transition to those forms that were thought to be compatible with the right way of being in the world. Theories of social change became sociology's algorithms, whose job it was to sustain the illusion of a dynamic Western culture in motion toward progress.

In colonial Africa, these narratives produced ambivalent results. On the one hand, and as Mahmood Mamdani has convincingly argued, they allowed colonial regimes to pursue their colonial projects premised on the production of the distinction between citizen and subject.[8] This distinction appealed to two distinct worlds. One was a modern world of rights, citizenship, and freedom, and the other was a traditional world of custom, subjection, and despotism.

On the other hand, however, the narratives confronted colonial regimes with the need for change, that is, the requirement that traditional society changes to allow the human condition to take its course in those inhospitable places. This was the context for the soul-searching debates within colonial circles over the apparent inability of Africans to respond to cues for change. The American historian of Africa Frederick Cooper has described these reflections very well in the context of West Africa, especially in his focus on colonial officials who worried that Africans in urban settings would *uproot* and with that lose the normative footing given to them by their tribes.[9] But it was mainly anthropologists of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia, who laid the conceptual groundwork for this.[10] Contrary to the expectation that life in urban areas would encourage Africans to detribalize, as had purportedly been the case in Europe, what they observed was a process of "re-tribalization" that had seen Africans from diverse ethnic backgrounds reconnecting with their kin and seeking their company in the urban areas. This was seen as proof of Africans' inability to change, that is, responding to a basic human instinct.

An ordinary human response to normal social circumstances was seen as a metaphysical reaction documenting the truth of theoretical postulates. It is typical of human beings to respond to adversity by seeking kin support and relying on the emotional comfort that familiarity affords. In doing so, Africans were behaving the way any reasonable person behaves under similar circumstances. Even Europeans behaved similarly, albeit at a different scale. Wherever they went, they kept to themselves, setting up the apartheid system, for example, or whole colonies in Latin America, Australia, and North America. In Europe itself, religious affiliations, regional ties, and ethnic identities, when

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8. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.
9. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*.
10. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, has a comprehensive description of the stakes.

given the opportunity, flared up in explosive ways, as we know from the brutal wars fought in the Balkans not long ago.

Researchers failed to see this ordinary reaction of Africans to normal circumstances because they were speaking to a theoretical framework detached from what human beings are like. The theoretical framework was an accurate description of a world that did not exist. The world of social cohesion obtained through imagined Europeans responding to ideal world accounts, not to real-life conditions. While it is true that what Durkheim describes as "organic solidarity" is an adequate response to forms taken by the division of labor, it is equally valid that such a response is one among many that, given historical circumstances, could have obtained. Individualism is not the universal reaction to the modern condition, whatever we mean by that. Instead, individualism is a local response to the current state given certain circumstances that research might specify.

To say that there is no such thing as Africa is not to claim that the field of African studies deals with nothing. It is to say that studying Africa is not about telling the truth about Africa. It is about speaking about how we can understand how the many truths about the continent came into being. My main concern is a methodological one with a strong bearing, as I believe, on the idea of the humanities and why it is that their defense is also the defense of science.[11]

When I claim that Africa is a simulacrum, I mean three things. First, I mean to say, in a constructionist way, that the concept of Africa does not describe an essential entity. Instead, it describes discursive and institutional procedures by which we came to associate the word *Africa* with a particular place, history, and way of being. There is no reason why "Africa" could not be just the landmass south of the Sahara—and there are occasionally debates about this. Equally, there is no reason why Africa should not include Greece and parts of the Middle East if one takes Martin Bernal's suggestion in his work on the "Black Athena" that there was an "Afro-Asiatic world."[12] There is nothing new here, except the reminder that there is no easy escape from what is oppressive if we cannot think of radically different ways of talking about us and, for that matter, them. Such conceptual categories as "Africa" keep us firmly within the camp we think we are leaving by questioning the misrepresentation of our reality. In this sense, then, the rejection of an essential notion of Africa is creative, for, through the disruption

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11. This is particularly urgent against the background of the growth of anti-intellectualism reflecting itself in the preference for unsubstantiated claims over factual ones. While polemical, Nichols's *Death of Expertise* describes the problem in a way that allows us to understand the extent of the problem.

12. Bernal, *Black Athena*.

of the narrative taking Africa for granted, it allows us to develop new ways of thinking about Africa.

Second, when I claim that Africa is a nonexistent entity about which truthful representations abound, what I mean is that we make sense of it, not by reference to it. Instead, we make sense of it by referencing the way we think and write about it. I am drawing on the British philosopher Tim Crane to distinguish between what we are thinking and what makes what we are thinking true.[13] The standard way we have challenged this in African studies has been to appeal to the Marxist notion of political economy—the same one that underlies Edward Said's and Valentin Mudimbe's Foucauldian rejection of the Orient or Africa as truthful representations.

In other words, we have appealed to the idea that representations of Africa are functional to the reproduction of the power of the West over whatever its scholars are in the business of representing. This is, of course, a powerful idea, but it is also quite limiting as it fails to explain why those representations are taken up by the represented themselves. Saying that they are the victims of false consciousness will not help. Furthermore, it drives us to an intellectual cul-de-sac, as it did Mudimbe, who in his *L'Odeur du père* suggested that since we will never know what Africa is, we might as well invest our energy in appreciating the insidious ways in which the West has implanted itself in Africans.[14]

Sadly, I think we do that, and a measure of how deeply unsatisfactory this can be is evident in how ideology has slowly but surely replaced methodology as the standard for validating knowledge claims. We have grown increasingly comfortable rejecting arguments because they are racist, misogynist, neoliberal, or colonial without, sometimes, taking care to engage critically with their conceptual, theoretical, and methodological soundness.

Not everything silly is racist, even though everything racist is undoubtedly foolish. I suspect that this attitude comes from the quite sensible idea that knowledge is political. Yes, this is true. But to say that knowledge is political does not commit us to the view that things we might not understand or even like are political. If we are disturbed by something—for example, when someone says that Africa's development failures are to be blamed on Africans themselves (or their culture, for that matter)—whoever

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13. Crane, *Meaning of Belief*, offers an account of truth based on the idea of explanation. In other words, he claims that we are able to speak meaningfully about nonexistent things (e.g., the fictional character Sherlock Holmes) by reference to things that do exist. We can talk about Sherlock Holmes with reference to the fact that he is a fictional character, one that many people know and have read books about, and so on. By the same token, in grappling with the potential logical problem of depriving myself of an object when I claim that there is no such thing as "Africa," I draw from these insightful ideas by Crane to argue that to the extent we can refer to what does exist (e.g., people act with reference to Africa), we can talk meaningfully about Africa.

14. Mudimbe, *L'Odeur du père*.

makes such a claim is not wrong because the idea itself is politically insensitive. He is wrong because we might show that it is methodologically problematic not to consider the role of history and how Africans were forced to find their way in a hostile world not of their own making.

I sometimes think privileging ideological reasoning may be intellectually dishonest, because our ability to find fault with some claim is linked to our ability to appeal to standards of reasoning worked out by the thought system we seem to reject wholesale. Knowledge is not political if by that we mean it always conceals a will to power. This sounds to me to be a logically untenable position, for there would be no basis to accept the claim that knowledge is political. Ultimately, however, were that to be the case, we would have to give up the idea that we might conduct valuable conversations among ourselves.

But let me return to my second point about what I mean when I say Africa is a non-existent entity. To say that we make sense of Africa by referencing how we think about it is to claim that we need to engage with what we take for granted. The point of departure is, as with many other things academic, the Enlightenment. It endowed the social sciences and the humanities with what I happen to believe to be the most critical idea in the constitution of truths about Africa. This is the idea of change, as I have indicated above. The idea of progress was the outcome of how the Enlightenment transformed the future, to use Peter Wagner's words,[15] into a "social project," or what Philipp Lepenies has described as the "invention of progress."[16] Adam Kuper's brilliant description of how the search for "primitive society"—he calls it the "invention of primitive society"—led social anthropology astray speaks volumes about the centrality of the idea of change.[17] Sociology's obsessive insistence on the distinction between tradition and modernity and its desire to relate non-European social phenomena to the former, that is, tradition, document how the idea of change yielded the epistemological rationale for transforming—as in the civilizing mission, modernization, and now development—a central mode of intelligibility in addressing Africa.

The outcome was the paradox. On the one hand, the idea of change that came to dominate the epistemology of social science posited human history as a dynamic movement toward something thought to be good. This warranted a conceptual vocabulary requiring the construction of Africa as a space where time had come to a halt, or, to put it in Johannes Fabian's words, it construed Africa's present as the past of Europe.[18]

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15. Wagner, *Sociology of Modernity*.
16. Lepenies, *Art, Politics, and Development*.
17. Kuper, *Invention of Primitive Society*.
18. Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

Now, this was a kind of negative vocabulary let loose on an unsuspecting world to produce descriptions of what the world looked like when it failed to conform to the European norm, while at the same resisting acknowledging the contingent nature of the world, that is, the possibility that it may have been otherwise.

My concern is not to criticize the production of Otherness. I want to focus on a methodological issue about how, in science, the business of constructing conceptual objects serves the purpose of meeting our need for reassuring stories about what we take for granted. The production of "Otherness," from this perspective, is not necessarily a significant project in the European intellectual agenda, but rather an accident in the search for certainty about who Europeans were. This is not to say that "Otherness" did not serve convenient ends, especially in the colonial project. I suppose I am trying to say that we—and I mean Africans—would be well advised to avoid taking things too personally. Science, that is, why we should trust what we know, is at stake here, and it represents the challenge that the ways of knowing that Europeans invented in centuries past pose for us.

On the other hand, the idea of change posited a common human fate that narrowed the scope of our conceptual vocabularies to either a confirmation or, primarily, a rejection of the European account of the world with, however, no escape from it. To put this differently, engaging critically with the vocabulary of the social sciences and humanities that rendered Africa visible became itself a locus for the "re-invention" of Africa in our terms, that is, as a document of our resistance to Europe. As Kwame Anthony Appiah once put it, the emperor ordered the natives to wear clothes, and they, in an act of defiance, decided to wear clothes made from homespun cloth.[19]

Africa became an intellectual ghetto that we—African scholars—confined ourselves to in order to work out alternative meanings from the conceptual vocabulary and reassure ourselves that the mere act of questioning and calling for local perspectives and epistemologies would yield a better empirical object worthy of the name *Africa*. We did what the French sociologist Jean Copans described, in a challenging and perhaps unfair way, as the transformation of African studies into mere esoteric speculation and a purely aesthetic form of modernity.[20] In other words, we compounded the negation of Africa through the epistemological and imperial rule of theories of change in the pursuit of knowledge about Africa with our invention of the fleeting illusion of an empirical object.

Third, when I say that Africa is a simulacrum, its intelligibility rests with our ability to refer to other things, real things, in our description of Africa. Knowledge of Africa

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19. Appiah, *In My Father's House.*
20. Copans, "Les sciences sociales africaines ont-elles une âme de philosophie?"

was built on the foundation of European technological and scientific superiority. The social sciences and the humanities appealed to the artifacts of this superiority to account for Africa, this nonexistent entity. To put it simply, the certainty that Africa was what it was claimed to be came from the ability to give meaning to European superiority. Therefore, the case, that is, truth, has no relationship with the thing itself but instead with what our account of it means to us.

It might be helpful here to dwell on a particularly thorny issue. Elsewhere,[21] I described the issue as "radical silence," which is, in fact, a statement of a general problem. It is a critique of the failure to make a distinction between epistemology and methodology. The decolonial intellectual agenda frames the situation as an epistemological one. I think it is a methodological one. The epistemological issue has to do with the conditions any statement about Africa—in fact, about anything—must fulfill to count as a social science observational statement. I define social science observational statements as statements that make intelligible claims about the world. An understandable claim about the world is not valid by definition. Instead, it is one whose validity can be tested empirically. It is the nature of social science observational statements that they draw from facts warranting underlying claims. Testing a claim, therefore, means establishing whether the reasons we have for seeing a link between a claim and the facts supporting them, that is, a warrant, are valid. If they are reasonable, then the claim is an intelligible one. Furthermore, intelligible claims help us understand social phenomena.

For example, there was a controversy recently involving a claim that colonialism had not been that bad, after all.[22] The facts supporting the claim were the purported benefits of colonialism as far as the civilizing mission was concerned, the failures of postcolonial states, and the apparent success of the countries that embraced their colonial legacy. To make this an intelligible claim, we need to test the logical inference linking the facts to the claim. The logical hypothesis states that when something has benefits that are not achieved by what replaces it, it must be good. To test this claim, therefore, we would need to check again what we mean by "benefit," "embracing the colonial legacy," and "postcolonial failure." We do not need to carry out any replication study to know this is not a social science observational statement. It is an ideological statement serving the sole purpose of asserting one's commitment to a so-called conservative worldview.

The claim in question is from Bruce Gilley's infamous *Third World Quarterly* article titled "The Case for Colonialism." The uproar caused by the article led to the block resignation of a considerable number of the editorial board members who were incensed that such a progressive journal could publish such an ethically insensitive piece. The

21. In a lecture at the University of Leipzig in 2019.
22. Gilley, "Case for Colonialism."

problem, however, is that an ethically cold article is not necessarily wrong or "unscientific." Bruce Gilley's statement was not false because it was morally insensitive. It was wrong mainly because it was "unscientific."

However, there is something about this "ethical insensitivity" that is important to anyone who engages in African studies. It has become almost impossible to be part of this community of scholars without a particular commitment not only to specific core values, including those entailing respect for human dignity—which is impossible without an outright rejection of the suggestion that there may have been something remotely good about colonialism—but also to the strong interest in laying bare the obstacles standing in the way of proper deployment of social science tools in the service of a better understanding of the African world. This commitment describes, in broad terms, the decolonial intellectual agenda. Indeed, the agenda makes the legitimate and reasonable assumption that we owe our understanding of the world to a conceptual vocabulary and attendant ways of knowing what made the world possible, including the subaltern position we occupy in it.

In other words, what we know and can claim to know is intimately linked to a normative account of the world, which is another way of saying that validity in social sciences or humanities may sometimes be part of a larger project of rendering the injustice of this world legitimate. Some of the things said about us and about which we are uncomfortable may be problematic because of what they contribute toward upholding this normative account. To the extent that this has served in the past to further the colonial project, uncritical use of the vocabulary of the social sciences and the humanities may turn us into accomplices to a most complex imperial project. Therefore, a decolonial intellectual agenda confronts this head-on by both signposting the conceptual minefield we thread every time we seek to say anything meaningful about ourselves and guarding against the naive assumption that concepts are innocent.

The problem with Bruce Gilley's "nonpaper" is much more serious than the way I put it. To the extent that it is poor scholarship because it is ideological, it is a colonial intervention availing itself of social science vocabulary to promote a problematic normative account of the world. The normative order underlying social sciences and the humanities framed local culture as an inconvenient distraction that should not be allowed to stand in the way of an accurate description of the world. As the Indian scholars who initiated the debate at the time argued, Western feminism could easily hate the practice of widow burning, which they saw as an extreme form of patriarchal oppression from which Indian women should be saved since they did not have to engage with the women themselves, not even with those who might willingly engage in that practice. The Marxist notion of "false consciousness" could always be depended upon to rationalize the refusal to listen to the subaltern.

This is not a defense of widow burning to protect local culture. It is an attempt at drawing attention to the comfort within which it is possible to deploy the vocabulary of the social sciences if one believes oneself to be part of a superior culture. The problem for people like me, those whom Aimé Césaire, the great negritude poet, described as those who invented nothing,[23] is that my use of social science vocabulary does not enjoy the protection of a higher culture.

There is much, therefore, to make us wary of the Enlightenment project. However, it seems a mistake to ignore the ethical importance of its call for a universal human ethos that grounds sociability on the human capacity to learn from history. The Enlightenment project did not invent human dignity, freedom, fraternity, and equality. Still, it made them relevant to any definition of the good life to the extent crucial for our own efforts at securing human dignity. Kwame Nkrumah's call for Africans to seek the political kingdom first, upon which all other things would follow,[24] drew its strength from an appeal to the Enlightenment values of freedom, self-determination, and progress.

Radical silence is the conscious decision to shut up if we are unable to conceive of African studies as an intellectual agenda that is not precisely in pursuit of research results but rather is a methodological enterprise concerned with the clarification of how we can make meaningful statements about Africa or anything for that matter. Furthermore, radical silence is the conscious decision to shut up if we fail to perceive the normative order underlying the knowledge we produce about Africa. This normative order does not hail from a primordial world but rather commits us to become better Europeans than Europeans themselves, that is, saving the Enlightenment project from those who defiled it. Ever since the Enlightenment, to be a European is to be imbued with the values underlying a world of common humanity committed to human progress and well-being. Yet, as we know, colonialism, the practice of the slave trade, and official support of the apartheid system in South Africa well into the dusk of the last century undermined this self-perception in ways that made it no longer tenable for Europeans to associate the values of the Enlightenment to an essential European condition unproblematically.

Radical silence is an intellectual agenda claiming the Enlightenment to itself, for it is clear that those who always claimed to speak on its behalf betrayed it.[25] This is not Jean-Paul Sartre's cultural appropriation of negritude to be history becoming aware of itself,

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23. Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*.

24. Nkrumah, *Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* ("Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all other things shall be added unto you").

25. Hence the idea of becoming better "Europeans" than "Europeans."

as Robert Young once put it.[26] It is me saying that if we could speak, we could be better Europeans than Europeans themselves. Eurocentrism is not a European form of ethnocentrism. Eurocentrism is the cynical attitude of proclaiming universal values by which you do not abide in your actions. Eurocentrism is the failure to observe practical reason, this most critical Kantian categorical imperative, that is, following the values you hold to be true. The universal values underlying the Enlightenment project gave the language of science an ethical substance upon which concepts became useful descriptive tools and normative. Binaries like modernity/tradition did not only describe where a society found itself on the historical line. They also became critical commentaries on how much they were consistent with the good life. African studies as a vital enterprise could not engage knowledge production without unraveling this web of description and normativity. In so doing, however, and simply taking the Enlightenment seriously, African studies became part of the project and had no choice but to commit itself to fulfill the project. Therefore, in this sense, the normative order of African studies and, indeed, of the humanities and social sciences is the unfinished Enlightenment project.

CONCLUSION

This sets the stage for concluding remarks by broadening the perspective and sharing thoughts on what this means to the humanities. As I noted earlier, there is a sense in which we can say that the humanities are beleaguered. Neoliberal politics, which is fundamentally anti-intellectual to the extent that it stands for the principle of the ends that justify the means, has created a hostile environment for an entire intellectual life—one that pursues reflection, fosters the culture of debate, and promotes deliberation. The significant effect has been the questioning of the usefulness of the humanities under the mistaken belief that they contribute nothing to our well-being. Usefulness has become the primary criterion by which we judge the value of science. The problem with this is that it promotes the view that usefulness also validates knowledge, an idea that, if taken seriously, would completely undermine the whole scientific enterprise, including the life sciences.

The word *paradox* describes, etymologically, that which is beyond belief. That is the account of Africa as produced by the social sciences and humanities. It is beyond belief because what renders it intelligible is a reason that speaks to a particular place, history, and, why not, will to power that denies Africa as an entity in its own right. It is beyond belief because the conceptual and theoretical apparatus deployed by the social sciences to produce the account of Africa underlying our claims to truthfulness is contested and invites resistance. Resistance, however, is a conceptual trap, especially the kind of

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26. Young, *White Mythologies*.

resistance that takes us down the road of ethnophilosophy,[27] about which Paulin Houn-tondji warned us, to proclaim our epistemologies.

While I welcome and hail the corrective that such principled stances represent and the potential benefits they can bring to the pursuit of knowledge, I fear that they lead us into a notion of Africa that is just as problematic as the one we are trying to escape from. Africa becomes an intellectual ghetto, effectively enabling some of us to speak the truth, shut down those who disagree with us, and pretend we are speaking on behalf of people with no voice when rehearsing and rehashing everything that led the knowledge production enterprise down a blind alley.

When I call upon my colleagues in African studies to unmake Africa, I am inviting them to approach knowledge production like children approaching the world. I am asking them to see the world as a mystery that needs to be unveiled. To do so, we need to take it apart, disassemble it, and then join peers in inquiring into this incredible human ability to reassemble bits and pieces of things, whatever things, into meaningful some-things. I am asking them to always bear in mind that deep down, knowing Africa is not about knowing what the case is, what Africa is, but rather how accounts of Africa come to count as truth, half-truths, myths, inventions, and representations. Once in possession of this, what we know can be empowering because it will yield insights likely to help us create new or different ways of being in the world.

There is no such thing as knowledge of Africa if we mean what could pass as a truthful representation of the continent. Such an epistemological attitude would force us into a problematic logical situation of assuming what needs to be established. We do not even, for that matter, study Africa to know Africa. We study Africa to understand how to study Africa and to know how to study anything, if at all. Knowing how to research anything is a creative process, one holding the promise of new insights.

That is, incidentally, the value of the humanities. A recent and fascinating book by Sabine Hossenfelder, a German physicist—the title of the book, revealingly, is *Lost in Math—How Beauty Leads Physics Astray*—claims that physicists' obsession with the idea that the truth is that which lives up to the aesthetic standards of maths.[28] She confesses that she opted for physics because she felt that she did not understand human behavior. Twenty years afterward, she realized she did not understand physics because she did not understand human behavior. She was quipping, of course, but there is

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27. "Ethnophilosophy" describes the conflation of what is taken to be an indigenous system of thought in Africa with philosophy. Paulin Hountondji (*African Philosophy*) resists this by arguing for a rigorous distinction between academic philosophy and what researchers bring to light as representative of an African worldview.

28. Hossenfelder, *Lost in Math*.

THEME

profound truth in that confession. The idea that the purpose of science lies in producing truths enabling us to make artifacts leads the life sciences into a crisis of identity as they realize that the value of technological artifacts does not lie with their practical use but rather with what they mean to people.

Producing knowledge is producing meaning. What is left over when we remove technology, truth, and, for that matter, Africa from the stock of knowledge in the world is *meaning*—as, for example, when we remove slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and so on, what is left, when we remove this, is a profound, shameful ethical contradiction in the West. Therefore, again, what is left is what it means to be a human being, what it means to have needs, what it means to struggle for recognition, what it means to engage in dialogue with others, what it means to sit down together to think about the history of the humanities. Science is an extended conversation about the meaning of it all. We keep that conversation going by constantly asking ourselves how we know what we think we know when we know that we know what we know or think we know. It is an endless loop.

That loop is the "what" that should replace "Africa," because studying Africa is unmasking it to lay bare how it was constituted, but also to keep alive the promise that a critical engagement with the political economy of knowledge may be creative.

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